DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 043 634 TE 002 074

AUTHOR	Bell, Bernard
TITLE	Black Literature: What Happens to a Dream Deferred?
INSTITUTION	New England Association of Teachers of English, Burlington, Vt.
PUB DATE	Apr 70
NOTE	8p.
JOURNAL CIT	Leaflet; v69 n2 p3-10 Apr 1970
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.50
DESCRIPTORS	African American Studies, American Literature, Authors, Content Analysis, Cultural Factors, *Literary Analysis, Negro Culture, *Negro Literature, *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

Innovative approaches should be used in introducing black literature to students so that they may develop an awareness of the ethnic pluralism of American society. A variety of sources provides the teacher with literary materials and critical perspectives as background for presenting black literature in any of several ways: (1) a survey of black literary works from colonial times through the Harlem Renaissance to the present; (2) a study of "black classics" (e.g., those by Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, J. W. Johnson, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin); (3) a unit on the image of black character in American literature; (4) an inquiry into the use of Afroamerican folklore in black literature; (5) an analysis through literature of the Afroamerican life which developed from an African inheritance in a hostile country; and (6) an exploration of the black consciousness of Harlem Renaissance literature and of modern black literature. (JMC)

Leaflet, Vol. 69, No. 2,
April 1970.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED043634

TE 002 074

BLACK LITERATURE: WHAT HAPPENS TO A DREAM DEFERRED?

by BERNARD BELL

One of the most striking poems in Langston Hughes's "Montage of a Dream Deferred" is "Harlem":

What happens to a dream deferred?

This poem compels the reader to think about the meaning of the American Dream to those who live in the black ghettos. In our highly technocratic society, education is an integral part of this dream. Its purpose is to teach people to think effectively. Put another way, formal education enables students to develop the attitudes, abilities and skills necessary to see and live in the world as it actually is. The tacit assumption here is that a knowledgeable citizen is a good citizen. However, the tendency to profess rather than to practice this concept of education in American schools has helped to lay the groundwork for what might well be the most apocalyptic revolution this country has known.

If we look at the young people of America—those under thirty-five—and their increasing rejection of racism and war, we see the handwriting on the wall. America is faced with a revolution, a revolution that challenges both the authority of the ruling class and the legitimacy of traditional values, a revolution that is bound to change the lives of us all. But I am not about to go into the long history of the oppression of black Americans or to catalogue its tragic parallels in text books and teaching. For in this era of the Coleman Report, the Kerner Commission Report, Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age,* and the confrontation in New York's Oceanhill-Brownsville district, school administrators and teachers from Biloxi, Mississippi, to Middlebury, Vermont, are finding it increasingly difficult to rationalize their blindness to what is going on in

Bernard Bell is Chairman of the Department of Afroamerican Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Mass.

Copyright 1970, by the New England Association of Teachers of English.

America and their resistance to what must be done to change the situation. What I want to discuss is that body of American literature which until recently was omitted from the school curriculum and some methods of transmitting this literature to students.

Traditionally, when we speak of American literature we mean literature by whites. We have only to reflect on our own formal education and preparation as teachers to realize how institutionalized the myth that white is right is in American life. For obvious reasons, this myth is not as disturbing to whites as it is to blacks. First of all, the systematic exclusion of black writers from textbooks, anthologies, and surveys of American literature projects a false image of the ability and achievement of black Americans. In addition, it reinforces the cultural and racial chauvinism of white America. Most importantly, as a result of the conspiracy of silence about the literary achievements of black Americans, our knowledge about America is at best incomplete and our qualifications for teaching black literature severely limited.

What this means for the majority of teachers is that before they can educate others about the achievements of black writers they must first educate themselves. Despite the misguided belief of some people, the Afroamerican literary tradition did not begin in 1940 with the publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son* nor did it end in 1955 with James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son.* Like the American literary tradition, the Afroamerican tradition begins with the letters, speeches, pamphlets, journals and poems of the first black men and women in this country, and in each generation it continues to surge forth with a new vitality.

Generally speaking, in Vernon Loggins' *The Negro Author: His Development to 1900,* Sterling Brown, Arthur Davis, and Ulysses Lee's *The Negro Caravan,* Melville Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past,* Herbert Aptheker's *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States,* and Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act,* one finds the major literary materials and critical perspective necessary to begin exploring the merits of black literature. Considering the availability of these sources, how old must a student be before he discovers that Phillis Wheatley, a Senegalese slave, was the second American woman to publish a book of verse and one of the best American neoclassical poets of the colonial period? How long must students wait for teachers to introduce them to the values of African culture found in the slave narrative of Gustavus Vasa or the picture of American life found in the autobiography of Frederick Douglass? Though many white teachers are familiar with Paul Laurence Dunbar, the black poet—thanks to the Dean of American Let-

ters—few know Dunbar the novelist. And fewer still know Charles W. Chesnutt, Dunbar's contemporary and chief rival for the distinction of being the most outstanding black writer in nineteenth century American literature. If Dunbar, in the words of William Dean Howells, was the first black American to "feel Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically," then Chesnutt was the first to win wide acclaim for his craftsmanship in fiction. Howells compared the "quiet and force" of Chesnutt's art to that of "Maupassant, or Tourguenief, or Mr. James, or Miss Jewett, or Miss Wilkins." Of course, those who have pursued the study of black literature independently know all this, and are fully aware that the local color stories of Chesnutt have a greater fidelity to Afroamerican character than those of Joel Chandler Harris. But what about those teachers who have not pursued the study of black literature on their own? What about those who are aware that young people are no longer content to receive a white-washed picture of American life but are either unwilling or unable to teach black literature? To the former I say again the handwriting is on the wall; to the latter I suggest that they start acquiring the necessary knowledge and sensitivity to become as imaginative in their approach to the teaching of black literature as they are in teaching white.

Perhaps the easiest way to teach Afroamerican literature in the classroom is the namedropping approach; that is, the introduction of individual black writers as they appear in the history of American letters. In poetry the list begins either in 1746 with Lucy Terry's "Bars Flight" or in 1760 with Jupiter Hammon's "An Evening Thought." In prose we begin either in 1661 with the petition of slaves for freedom or in 1787 with Jupiter Hammon's "Address to Negroes in the State of New York." In fiction and drama the list begins with William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853) and *The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom* (1858). As the focus moves from the colonial period and the literary achievements of slaves and ex-slaves on to the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and down to the contemporary scene and such young, gifted and black writers as Don Lee in poetry, Eldridge Cleaver in prose, William Melvin Kelley in fiction, and Ed Bullins in drama, the students will receive a more complete picture of American life and culture.

Instead of an historical survey of individual black writers some teachers may prefer to introduce a unit on the black classics. Frederick Douglass' *The Life of an American Slave* (1845), Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901), W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Richard Wright's *Native Son*

(1940), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) are a few of the works to be included in such a unit. All are available in paperback.

A more effective approach, I think, would be a unit on the image of black character in American literature. Seymour Gross and John Hardy's *Images of the Negro in American Literature* (1966) and Sterling Brown's *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937) are invaluable teaching aids for such a unit. Moreover, since this approach covers both white and black authors, it should meet with less resistance in white communities. But regardless of the hostility of the few and the anxiety of the many, those who choose this method should have the commitment to truth necessary to trace the stereotypic image of black character in American literature from James Fenimore Cooper to William Styron.

On the other hand, for those administrators and teachers who are not only committed to meeting the needs of students living in a pluralistic society but also aware that the question to ask of studies like Arthur Jensen's "How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?" is not are they biased, but in what way and to what degree are they biased —for those administrators and teachers I suggest a more analytical method of treating the achievement of black writers. In general, the most striking characteristic of black literature is its thematic concern with Africa and Afroamerican folklore. By folklore, I mean the transmission of the culture of a group of people through their speech, songs, sermons, myths, legends and tales. In these folk materials we are made aware of the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and values by which a group of people live. When J. Saunders Redding stated that "values and value judgments, ideas and ways of thinking about these ideas; customs, costumes and manners—all these and more, both abstract and concrete—are the same for Negro Americans and for white," it was fashionable to endorse the myth of America as a melting pot of ethnic groups. But modern sociological studies from Charles Silberman's penetrating analysis in *Crisis in Black and White* (1964) to Julius Lester's revolutionary fervor in *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* (1969) provide more than adequate evidence that the contrasting historical and emotional experiences of white and black Americans—the legacies of Africa, slavery, caste and the American Creed—have resulted in similar yet distinctly different ethnic identities for each group. Equality, we seem to forget, means neither integration nor segregation.

In her seminal studies of American culture and character, Constance

Rourke reveals the complex relationship between the first popular American folk characters: the Yankee, the Backwoodsman, and the Negro. Although she alludes to "minor evidence . . . that the comic trio tended to merge into a single generic figure," Miss Rourke concludes that ". . . each of the trio remained distinct." Given the history of American racism, it should be equally clear that the tales and legends of David Crockett, Johnny Appleseed, and Paul Bunyan come from a different perspective than those of John, the trickster slave, Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people, and John Henry, the steel driving man; that the values affirmed in the Uncle Remus tales of Joel Chandler Harris are not identical to those affirmed in the Uncle Julius tales of Charles Waddell Chesnutt; and that the white planter's vision of the agrarian myth and American Dream is different from that of the black sharecropper. Whether in myth or character, the difference between Afroamerican and Anglo-American folklore is a difference in response to the paradoxes and values of American life. More importantly, the values expressed in rural and urban Afroamerican folklore are the well-spring of the black American's cultural heritage and the major source on which the best black writers have drawn for creative inspiration and materials.

With this in mind, a systematic inquiry into the use of folklore in black literature offers the teacher a challenging method of helping students to discover the truth about American culture and themselves. The inquiry method also enables the student to begin developing his analytical skills at an early age. For instance, in elementary school emphasis should be placed on identifying the different ethnic groups that helped build America. Rather than the usual Dick and Jane image of a homogenized white middle-class society, extensive use should be made of ethnic oriented reading and audiovisual materials. Portrayals of life in the black ghettos as well as in white suburbia should be an integral part of story-time and see-and-tell lessons. Recordings of poems about legendary black figures like Nat Turner, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, John Henry, W. E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Malcolm X should be used imaginatively. (Especially useful is Langston Hughes's album "The Dream Keeper," taken from his book of poems for children.) Chants, shouts, spirituals, work songs, blues, and jazz should also play an important role in introducing students to the rituals and values of black culture. Rather than "Little Black Sambo" and "Nicodemus" students should be encouraged to read Adele Whiting's *Negro Folk Tales for Pupils in the Primary Grades,* Langston Hughes' *The Dream Keeper,* Hughes and Arna Bontemps' *Popo and Fifina,* Gwendo-

lyn Brooks' *Bronzeville Boys and Girls,* Charlemae Rollins' *Christmas Gif'* and the historical series on minority groups published by Zenith Books. Elementary school children are not too young to begin learning the truth about themselves and others.

In junior high and high school emphasis should be placed on an analysis of the American Dream and what happens to a dream too long deferred. At this stage, students are ready to begin understanding the values which black Americans have inherited from their African and American past and have transmitted into the bedrock of a way of life which is neither African nor American, but Afroamerican. Like Ellison, I speak of the way black people walk, talk, dance and sing as well as the faith, patience, courage, craftiness, sense of timing and rugged sense of life that enabled them not only to endure but to survive.

At this level, it will be profitable for students to compare the heroic couplets of Anne Bradstreet with those of Phillis Wheatley; to compare the racial views expressed in Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on Virginia" (1787) with those revealed in Benjamin Banneker's letter to Jefferson in 1791; to compare the representative American character portrayed in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography with its counterpart in the autobiography of Frederick Douglass; to compare the revolutionary fervor of Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" (1776) with that of David Walker's "Appeal" (1829); and to compare the portrayal of Afroamerican character in Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia* (1890) with that in Charles Waddell Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman and Other Tales* (1899). If students have too much difficulty in understanding these selections, the teacher can always turn to the classic works of Mark Twain and William Faulkner.

The youthful white protagonists in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Faulkner's "The Bear" are both concerned with the myths and values of America. Through Huck Finn and Isaac McCaslin, students can analyze the meaning of Christianity, the impact of commercialism, the significance of man's conquest of nature, the importance of individualism, the merits of rationality and the insidious influence of American racism. The moral complexity of the works of Twain and Faulkner will challenge some of the students' conventional assumptions about the reality of the American experience. But if students are to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others through a critical analysis of literature, teachers must be wary of oversimplified readings that skirt the major paradoxes of American life and of glib generalizations that merely substitute one gallery of stereotypes for another.

An inquiry into the black literature of the Harlem Renaissance of the Twenties and Thirties should also prove rewarding for high school students. Like the Black Renaissance of today, the major thrust of the Harlem Renaissance was towards black consciousness. The emphasis was on Africa and Afroamerican folklore. Langston Hughes expressed the credo of the movement when he wrote:

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. . . . If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

In other words, most black writers of the period sought to explore rather than to exploit Afroamerican character and culture. In fiction, Rudolph Fisher's "Miss Cynthie" explores the generation gap between rural and urban black Americans; Arna Bontemps' "A Summer Tragedy" explores the plight of a gnarled old black sharecropper and his blind wife; and Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) explores a young black writer's attempt to reconcile himself to his African and slave past. In poetry, if students were to read "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes and "Heritage" by Countee Cullen, they would discover the complex psychological and emotional meaning of Africa to black Americans during the Twenties. Finally, when the cultural nationalism of modern black literature is analyzed, the difference between the values of the rural generation of black Americans of the Twenties and those of the present-day urban generation will provide meaningful insights into what happens to a dream too long deferred.

What I am suggesting is that in order for students to develop an awareness of the ethnic pluralism of American society and begin to understand the complexities of life, educators must be innovative in introducing black literature to their students. Toward this end, those educators who fail to understand the meaning of Africa to black Americans should become familiar with the writers of the Harlem Renaissance as well as the contributions of early black scholars like Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. DuBois, and Alain Locke. Those who still fail to understand why most black Americans reject William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* will find the answer by comparing the historiography of Ulrich Philips and Stanley Elkins with that of Kenneth Stampp and John Franklin.

Most importantly, those seeking to understand the rhetoric of LeRoi Jones, William Melvin Kelley, Ronald Milner, Ed Bullins, Eldridge Cleaver and other contemporary black writers would do well to go to books like Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps' *The Book of Negro Folklore,* where one finds not only the source of the vitality of black rhetoric but the soul of Afroamerican culture.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
New England Assn. of Teachers of English & Author
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."